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CAMERON

Lincoln





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W. J. Cameron

LINCOLN

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Lincoln

THIS APPRECIATION OF
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LINCOLN

Lincoln is the chief saint in the nation's calendar. Often as his natal day comes round the national mind is slowed to reverent mood. Our memory of him walks apart in paths of subdued reflection, for we behold him as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Here is no bold and valiant figure, with sword and buckler and stirring trumpet call, marching across his time to the acclaim of hosts; here, rather, is one from whom men hid their faces, whose countenance was woe-struck, who walked wearily his appointed way through the bitterest wine press of redemptive blood ever trod by man, save One.

Lincoln's whole life lingered in a minor key which through four years rose to a wail, and at the end sank into a miserere. If certain great works of literature are said to have scriptural quality, his life did show a scriptural movement. Like Moses he was nurtured with shepherds and husbandmen, and trained in those simple virtues which bear the strain of weightiest events. Righteousness was burned into his heart as the color of the sun into his skin. He came out of the west like a prophet, those choosing him knowing not what great thing they did—"it seemed too rash, on a purely local reputation, to build so grave a trust in such anxious times." His freedom from the common, pleasant faults of men was not surpassed by any devotee; he was sound to the core of his great heart. Like the spokesman of the moral law he stood before the people in times that allowed no state secrets, in a tumult that demanded daily account of what he did and what he thought, yet he stumbled not at all. He left one speech that will live with Isaiah's rapt prophecy, and at the end he laid down his life as a final sealing testimony of his faith. Surely he is our saint, and we do well to reverence him.

Abraham Lincoln lives not by what he did, but what he was.



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"Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face."

Intellectual giants do not wring tears from after generations. Military genius does not send us to the closet of tender meditation. Yet these are the influences of Lincoln's life, and they can have no source other than majestic moral strength and simple human tenderness. It is not by accident, neither by man's design, that we commonly think of Lincoln as inhabiting an exalted place—like Moses on the mount—where visions came to him and he made his vows familiarly to the Almighty as his best Advisor; it could not be otherwise with one for whom the higher laws were more clearly written than the statutes on the books.

Military genius we acclaim; intellectual superiority we boast; but character we reverence, and it were an unmeant profanity to hail Lincoln with screaming eagles. It was not military genius that accomplished Lincoln's work—consummate tacticians and brave warriors were admittedly with the other party. Intellectual power did not make up his strength—the argument was with the other side. But it was the moral straightness, clear, spiritual seeing, absolute trust in the uncompromised and unentangled Right that made the outcome what it was. Behind the battle plan was Abraham Lincoln's conscience, behind the far flung line of blue was Abraham Lincoln's conviction, and this is the true basis of his fame.

Simplicity and righteousness are the keys to Lincoln's life. One is not certain that the last could have existed without the first yet it was the last that made the first possible. Abraham Lincoln's surpassing clearness of vision in our most trying emergency was due to the simplicity in which he approached a problem. Philosophers had found so many considerations on both sides that they were mere weather vanes.

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Theologians lent their texts to the most opposite views. Politicians found themselves helpless in the mire of expediency. Forth came Abraham Lincoln asking: "Is slavery right? Is secession right?" Philosophy had its involved answer, theology its prosy homily, politics its evasions. Abraham Lincoln answered his simple question in the only way it could be answered, and for him the battle was over. He had only to go forth in his serene conviction, conquering and to conquer. He dared to be simple. He dared to ignore the entangling mazes of thought afraid of its own conclusions. He found the line between right and wrong, and took his stand to await the turning of the nation on his principle as on an axis. We little men dare not be simple. We cover our consciences with layer on layer of compromise and concealment. We ask, "What will this involve?" The speed with which the answer comes to the question, "Is it right?" unhorses us. We crave something more deliberate, with easy gradations, something that enables us to postpone taking our stand until the multitude is ready to stand with us. The complexity with which we have covered the questions of our individual and national life is our mantle of cowardice. Dare be simple and complexity vanishes—thus was Abraham Lincoln given his clear sight.

When Abraham Lincoln determined what was right the battle was over for him—with us it is only begun. Between seeing the good and doing it is the battleground for most of us. But the perception and the act were inseparably linked in Lincoln's character. He dared venture on the Right. He dared trust all that he was and all he hoped to be on it. That was his faith, that his religion, that the ground for his intimate thought of God. He seemed to SEE the operation of the moral law; he seemed to KNOW that it revenged itself on whomsoever violated it. His faith was an inner sight. To him the Right was neither philosophical,

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theological nor political—it was vital. God help him, he could do no other.

Through four years, every year an eternity and every day a bloody age, Lincoln held this faith. Defeat after defeat overwhelmed his armies and he held this faith. With traitors about him and foes beyond, he held this faith. Great Britain was all but leagued against him, but he held this faith; and one day our children's eyes will behold the letter he wrote in simple directness and righteous faith to Queen Victoria, wherein he placed the compulsion of the moral law on a mighty empire. St. John speaks of the "faith which overcometh the world," and it was given the peoples to behold it in Abraham Lincoln.

Faith in the simple right—that is what we reverence to-day in our nation's saint. Abraham Lincoln is not dead. Even now he calls the nation to the simplicity of moral candor in approaching its problems. Still he commands it to faith in the right, "as God shall give us to see the right," in prosecuting its mission. To see the right and to do it—one despairs of ever making plain the moral majesty of this simple program in these days when vast complexity is woven of compromise, expediency and evasion. Yet just here is the greatness of Abraham Lincoln, and through him the moral salvation of his generation. No greatness will ever again come to this people, except along this simple path of straightness. To paraphrase his words: It is for us, the living, rather to be rededicated to his unfinished work, for only thus shall the nation have large liberations, eternal emancipations.

The literature of his centenary year, is sufficient proof that the pall of Lincoln's end has not yet lifted from the people's heart. He is still "The Martyred President," though two have fallen since. We seem still to need the words of Emerson spoken at the Concord funeral services:

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"Far happier this fate than to have lived to be wished away; to have watched the decay of his own faculties; to have seen—perhaps even he—the proverbial ingratitude of statesmen; to have seen mean men preferred. Had he not lived long enough to keep the greatest promise that ever man made to his fellow man—the practical abolition of slavery? He had seen Tennessee, Missouri and Maryland emancipate their slaves. He had seen Savannah, Charleston and Richmond surrendered, and seen the main army of the rebellion lay down its arms. He had conquered the public opinion of Canada, England and France. Only Washington can compare with him in fortune."

Our Lincoln wasted not an hour of his arduous day, and when the task was finished heaven saw its completeness and gave him early rest. Thank God you live in a land that claimed him living and reverences him dead.

